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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Secular Transformations and Spiritual Manifestations

Three Poems by Auden

by

Zachary Rosenblum

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of


Master of Arts

January 2015

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College of Humanities and Social Sciences

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the spiritual subtext in W. H. Auden's poetry and the way this subtext is manifest as an imagining of the secular in spiritual terms. Through biographical and critical texts, Auden's poetry can be understood as a method of exploring his own spiritual framework. "The Unknown Citizen," "For the Time Being," and "The Shield of Achilles," written between 1939 and 1952, Auden's spiritual concerns can be observed.

Each of the poems grows on the foundation of the previous one. "The Unknown Citizen" (1939) is the least spiritual, ironizing Auden's own perspective; Auden uses this ironizing process again for the voice of Herod in "For the Time Being" (1942). "The Unknown Citizen" uses a satirical base to discuss ethical concerns which anticipate the spiritual concerns addressed in "For the Time Being." Auden draws from the modern, secular world and transforms them in the context of the Nativity sequence in the Bible. Auden uses anachronisms throughout the poem to complicate any attempt to understand the poem as purely biblical or purely modern.

"The Shield of Achilles" (1952) continues his criticism of society's lack of spirituality. This second transformation imagines an episode from *The Iliad* in modern terms. By juxtaposing the images of Thetis's idealized society with dystopian images which Hephaestus forges onto the shield, Auden criticizes both those who lack spirituality, like the subjects of the dystopian shield, and those who fail to understand it, like Thetis. Auden never actually settles on an ideology, and his spiritual explorations raise more questions than they answer, but he also deftly presents spirituality and the lack of spirituality in all three poems.

SECULAR TRANSFORMATIONS AND SPIRITUAL MANIFESTATIONS:
THREE POEMS BY AUDEN

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of the Arts in English

by

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Montclair, NJ

2015

Contents:

Introduction	4
Chapter 1: The Spiritual Unknown ("The Unknown Citizen")	8
Chapter 2: Secularized Christmas ("For the Time Being")	21
Chapter 3: Upending the Classics ("The Shield of Achilles")	52
Conclusion	63
Bibliography	69

Introduction

The way W. H. Auden represents spiritual ideas evolves throughout his poetry. Though young Auden rejected religion, his ideas and philosophies eventually drift back to the Church. Christianity becomes a much more common subject in his poetry after 1938. Edward Mendelson uses 1938, the same year that Auden first visited New York, as the dividing line between *Early Auden* and *Later Auden*. Less than a year later, in January 1939, he made New York his permanent residence. Auden's negotiation of spiritually relevant issues moves toward constructing his own understanding of spirituality and seems to coincide with his change of residence. His return to Anglicanism is important for understanding his poetry. His long and complicated relationship with Christianity went through many phases, but as Humphrey Carpenter notes in *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, Auden "said he believed that all art was secular, and was not therefore really a fit vehicle for Christian belief" (320). In spite of his own beliefs about the role of spirituality in poetry, Auden's use of secular material grows into spiritual significance.

Three poems in particular show the development of Auden's concern for spiritual significance: "The Unknown Citizen," "For the Time Being," and "The Shield of Achilles." "The Unknown Citizen," was written in March 1939 and first published in *The New Yorker* in January 1940. It appeared again later that year in Auden's collection *Another Time*. Of the three poems, "The Unknown Citizen" is the least spiritual. It is proto-spiritual in that, while it anticipates the spiritual foundations of Auden's later works, it has little in the way of explicitly spiritual content. A satirical poem, it lists quantitative attributes of the citizen's life as a complete measure of his value to society and dismisses any question of "happiness" or "freedom" as "absurd." This is a proto-

spiritual concern for the inner life, happiness, and freedom of the individual. The poem uses satire to make these points while demonstrating the way spirituality can be more difficult to engage with directly. Instead Auden exposes that which is not spiritual.

The second poem to be discussed, "For the Time Being," is subtitled "A Christmas Oratorio" and uses the Nativity as its foundation. Auden employs a chorus, a narrator, and the principal figures of the Christmas story, namely the Angel Gabriel, Joseph, Mary, Simeon, and Herod, to develop a number of perspectives on spirituality. Auden frames the Nativity within "the Time Being," a modern world which is contextualized by both the trappings of modernity and the yearly reenactment of the Christmas story. This theme is grounded further in Auden's use of secular objects, like the broken Christmas ornaments and the kitchen table. Auden also liberally develops the figures of the Nativity. Joseph, for instance, must negotiate an intense crisis of his faith in Mary because of her apparent infidelity. The poem ends with the narrator and chorus, whose verses discuss the difficulty of maintaining faith while living in "the Time Being" and approach an understanding of faith and spirituality.

Auden uses anachronisms throughout the poems to construct the "Time Being" as more than a single frame within time; he inserts the Nativity into "the Time Being," which reaffirms its importance. Northrop Frye makes note of the same phenomenon in Auden's "Nones," describing it as "the birth and death of Christ [being]...simultaneous with the events of our own lives" (157). He continues, "the Crucifixion throws its shadow across all future history" (157). This concept of reaffirmation builds an inherent spirituality into the poem. Auden's own spirituality is manifest in his desire to reaffirm for himself the significance of these events.

Auden's decision to recommit to Christianity is also a factor in the way he imagines spirituality in his poetry. His religious development leading up to the composition of "For the Time Being" is gradual but can be traced to specific events. One such event occurred during a trip to Spain early in 1937, when Auden had tried to volunteer as an ambulance driver during the Spanish Civil War (Carpenter 208-9). Auden recalled his experience in Barcelona for the collection *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, recounting that "as I walked through the city that all the churches were closed and there was not a priest to be seen. To my astonishment, this discovery left me profoundly shocked and disturbed" (Pike and Hallowell 41). Carpenter, recounting a similar event in a movie theater in November 1939, writes that, upon hearing German-speakers scream "Kill them!" at the Poles in the film *Sieg im Poland*, Auden felt like his beliefs had been violated (282). Auden would later reflect on the moment, writing, "I wondered then, why I reacted as I did against this denial of every humanistic value. The answer brought me back to the church" (Carpenter 282). After this event Auden's return to Christianity becomes stronger, culminating in "For the Time Being." Carpenter writes that "Auden's conversion had been an exclusively intellectual process rather than a spiritual experience" (298), a claim that places Auden's religious experience outside of spirituality. On the contrary, spirituality is made in "For the Time Being" by encapsulating the Nativity within a secular context; Auden reaffirms the spirituality of Christmas, but never loses sight of the importance of "the Time Being" by framing it around the Nativity.

"The Shield of Achilles" uses Homer's depiction of Achilles's mythic shield to address spiritual decay. Auden uses the forging of the shield to repurpose Homer's original vision. Thetis, peering over Hephaestos's shoulder as he works, wants to see a

society that is more idealized than even Homer's description. Hephaestos shocks and disappoints her at every turn, instead offering anachronistic portrayals of a grim modernity. By the end of the poem, a "thin-lipped" Hephaestos has hobbled away, leaving Thetis to despair because her desire for idealization is affronted by the unspiritual images on the shield.

Auden's rendition of the shield is bereft of spirituality; featureless landscapes accompany a faceless voice controlling a mindlessly obedient mass. The "three pale figures" evoke the crucifixion, but emphasize a lack of spiritual well-being. The final scene on the shield depicts a world so far fallen that children commit murder, creating an extreme opposition to Thetis's desire to sentimentalize the shield with images that she believes can invoke spirituality. The shield is so bereft of spirituality that the street urchin has no faith in promises or the possibility of empathy.

All three poems craft arguments for spiritual understanding (or, at the very least, some inward reflection). But at no point does Auden make an explicit argument to the reader or demand anything of the reader. Instead, as the rest of my discussion will show, these poems operate by drawing attention to issues through irony and shock. Auden's changing perspectives on Christianity inform the satirical perspective of "The Unknown Citizen," which anticipates the spiritual underpinnings of "For the Time Being," and "The Shield of Achilles." While he expresses concern for the adversities of life, Auden's poems manage to offer up criticism of the rational-humanist perspective that Auden understood as deficient while developing his own concept of a spiritual virtue.

Chapter 1: The Spiritual Unknown ("The Unknown Citizen")

"The Unknown Citizen," for all its wit and irony on the surface, confronts difficult ideological issues. As the first of the three poems, "The Unknown Citizen" is also the most secular. However, the poem was written near the cusp of spiritual change in Auden's life and begins to address, in secular terms, some of the concerns which Auden will later view as spiritual problems. Of the three it is Auden's proto-spiritual poem, addressing concerns which are explicit in "For the Time Being" and "The Shield of Achilles." Auden wrote "The Unknown Citizen" in March 1939, shortly after he arrived in the United States. While he had not been significantly involved with the church for some time when the poem was written, he would join the Episcopal Church in less than two years.

Auden's pending return to Christianity is not made obvious through the poem, but Carpenter describes Auden around 1938 as believing that "All religions...are attempts to identify and delineate the divine laws" (269). *The Prolific and the Devourer*, a prose meditation on religion which Auden wrote in 1939 but was left unpublished until 1981 (Mendelson, *Prose II*, 408-9), offers a valuable look at Auden's concerns at that time. In that book Auden wrote that

Jesus convinces me that he was right because what he taught has become consistently more and more the necessary and natural attitude for man as society developed the way it has, i.e. he forecast our historical evolution correctly...if we reject the Gospels, then we must reject modern life. Industrialism is only workable if we accept Jesus' view of life, and

conversely his view of life is more workable under industrialism. (*The Prolific* 429-30)

Carpenter writes that Auden was attempting “to accept Christianity on entirely secular, humanist, and non-supernatural terms” and that Auden’s “general conclusion is to judge supernaturalism to be, if not necessarily wrong, then at least irrelevant” (269-70). “The Unknown Citizen” coincides with such a secular perspective on faith and religion. Because the poem is placed in a purely secular context, it cannot reach the same spiritual significance as “For the Time Being” and “The Shield of Achilles,” but “The Unknown Citizen” does begin to criticize modernity for its failure to appreciate the spiritual dimension of human life.

“The Unknown Citizen” uses 29 lines of free verse to describe a monument for a model citizen which has been built by a corporatized government. The poem uses a satirical corporate voice that tries to justify why the citizen is worth monumentalizing. The corporate voice lacks any concern for faith or spirituality. Nonetheless, Auden does afford the poem a number of spiritually ambiguous moments, beginning with the line: “all reports on his conduct agree / That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint” (*SP* 93).ⁱ The speaker constructs sainthood as an obsolete concept which must be reframed in a “modern sense” to be applied to the citizen. By modernizing the idea of sainthood, the speaker strips the significance from the concept. The sarcasm of the poem rescues the word from insignificance: if the government that put up the monument thinks sainthood in its traditional form is obsolete and without value, Auden believes otherwise. Mendelson writes that “The idea that there might be *saints*, although dismissed by the corporate voice of the poem, is implicitly endorsed by the voice of the

poet” (38). Auden may indeed be endorsing sainthood, and it is clear that at the very least the poem is not denigrating sainthood. However, the corporate government is far too concerned with exterior aspects of citizenship for the gesture to become convincing.

Auden’s implicit endorsement of sainthood also implies a disapproval of the way the corporate voice uses the word. The poem describes a citizen who worked in an automobile factory most of his life, was loyal to his country, family and friends, and was fiscally responsible and mentally sound. In referring to the citizen as a saint, the corporate voice also strips the word saint of the higher, more archaic significance implied by its “old-fashioned” sense. The modern sense that Sainthood is given is applicable to much more than miracle-workers. Though Auden’s citizen “satisfied his employers” and is clearly competent enough to “never [get] fired” (*SP* 93), he was no miracle-worker (had he been, he should certainly have climbed to a higher position). The citizen was not incredibly influential; all of his influence is artificially manufactured by the bureaucracy (and geared toward benefitting the bureaucracy). It does not follow that a word of as much significance as “saint” should be applied to him. While a lack of notable, selfless deed makes the citizen unworthy of such a title, the corporate voice of the poem applies the term anyway, cheapening the term “saint” and any concern for spiritual matters.

This is not at all to signify that Auden does not appreciate someone of the citizen’s social position. Beneath the irony of the poem is a concern for those like the citizen. Mendelson recounts how Auden would often seek the words of the least important-looking people during literary gatherings and even comforted a student left to fend for himself by his teacher at a convention (“Secret Auden”). The word “saint” is

used to denigrate the corporate voice and endorse a truer form of sainthood, not to denigrate the citizen.

What the corporate voice of "The Unknown Citizen" does endorse is fiscal viability. The bureaucratic forces in the poem are consistently concerned with the citizen's economic value; they monumentalize a citizen who will do the work he is told to do and buy what he is told to buy. The citizen is the working man who can provide labor to society, which will in turn sustain him and his family materially. These organizations' concern with economic viability dominate the poem:

For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
 ...The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
 ...He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan
 And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
 A gramophone, a radio, a car and a frigidaire. (*SP* 93)

These lines monumentalize the citizen because he was economically beneficial to the corporate elite, but they provide no sense of his interior life. The lack of interiority indicates that the speaker inhabits a space where there is no room for spirituality or the freedom to exercise it. The implication that all the "Modern Man" needs are material objects reaffirms the state's reliance on the exterior aspects to assess the value of a person.

The proto-spiritual mode with which Auden conceived "The Unknown Citizen" continues to anticipate issues brought up later by drawing attention to and exaggerating the oppressive expects of modern governments. Carpenter points out that Auden's perspective before November 1939 was contingent "on a belief in the natural goodness of

man” and “that if one specific evil were removed...then humanity would be happy and unrest would cease” (282). In the case of “The Unknown Citizen,” this would require dispelling the domination of the general population at the hands of the capitalist bureaucracy. However, in the poem no such uprising has proven successful; the State consists of bureaucracies and corporations, each assigned to track or control some aspect of all the citizens’ lives, dominating not by a purely physical repression, but by defining what life should be in material terms. The faceless voice of the government further ensures against any possibility that the citizen can construct his own identity. The fixation on the citizen’s exteriority offers no opportunity to observe the citizen’s intentions, desires, or feelings. If the speaker is operating in a corporately governed world where the state is only concerned with exterior aspects of humanity, the poem supports Auden’s “liberal—socialist—democratic” (Carpenter 282) perspective because the corporate voice of the poem is constantly being undermined by Auden’s irony.

Randall Jarrell, in his essay “Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden’s Ideology,” characterizes this stage of Auden’s ideology as the “New Auden” or “Moral Auden.” He writes that “everything important happens in the realm of logical necessity” (156). Although logical necessity seems an extreme phrase for Jarrell’s purpose, he uses it to refer to Auden’s process by which subjects are “categorized...in secular, liberal, humanitarian, sentimental, and metaphorically scientific terms” (156). Jarrell’s definition of how Auden categorizes his subjects is accurate in reference to “The Unknown Citizen,” but logical necessity is the last of Auden’s concern. The poem criticizes the way the corporate voice only has concern for logical necessities and superficial aspects of life;

Auden wants to draw attention to the lack of concern for the citizen's interior qualities, as is evident in the final lines of the poem.

Mendelson's *Later Auden* addresses "The Unknown Citizen" as a response to a specific event. Mendelson notes that on March 16, 1939, at a "Foreign Correspondents Dinner Forum" supporting the victims of the ongoing Spanish Civil War, Auden "was wielding the rhetorical powers of the hero-poet" and "was astonished by his own success" (36). What proved problematic for Auden, however, was that he aimed to sober his audience. Auden was hoping to make his audience reflect on themselves, or take on the spiritual search that he had been engaging with, by implying the complicity of the governing and the elite in the potential shortcomings of democratic government. Auden finished off the speech decisively, concluding that "If the democracies do not live up to their promises... '[it will be] our own people who... will rise up and sweep us away, and by God, ladies and gentleman, we shall deserve it'" (*Later Auden* 37). The attempt to instill a guilty self-awareness in the audience backfired; instead of sobered self-reflection, Auden was confronted by people cheering for him and his speech, seemingly unaware of the implications of Auden's final statement. He saw "members of such an audience [that] scarcely notice they are roaring for an attack on themselves" (37).

Auden's reaction to the misguided audience's zeal was visceral. He wrote in response, "Never, *never* again will I speak at a political meeting" (39). Taking this event as a cue, Mendelson claims that "In March 1939, probably soon after his speech, Auden wrote 'The Unknown Citizen,' a poem that appears to be a neat uncomplicated satire on the corporate state in which freedom and happiness are equated with conformity" (38).ⁱⁱ The problem with such an uncomplicated understanding of the poem is that the lack of

interiority conceals the citizen's political identity. Because the state is only concerned with exterior details, the citizen's actual political or social leanings can't be known. That the citizen "held the proper opinions for the time of year" is no more indicative; that the citizen apparently agrees with the corporate voice doesn't necessarily reveal his interiority. The citizen could just as easily be resentfully acquiescent to a government he knows he can't resist. The corporate voice's lack of concern for the citizen's interiority implies a freedom on the citizen's part to believe as he will, but only so long as those beliefs remain entirely unexpressed. In other words, the corporate voice is mostly interested in maintaining the status quo.

The absence of spirituality from the poem, combined with the satiric nature of "The Unknown Citizen," does not make the poem itself spiritual. Since the citizen's interiority is obscured by the material concerns of the speaker, the citizen cannot become a source of spirituality either (though his potential for spiritual value is certainly unknown, unlike most of the details of his life). This poem's value here is that it anticipates the spiritual concerns which Auden will raise in "For the Time Being" and "The Shield of Achilles." "The Unknown Citizen" lacks the spiritual aspects, but its irony is critical of the bureaucracies that do not value spirituality while expressing a concern for the corporate voice's ambivalence towards the citizen's interiority.

The poem's treatment of marriage is proto-spiritual. Auden took marriage very seriously as an emotional concept; after his relationship with Chester Kallman developed, he wrote and spoke of it as a marriage (*Later Auden* 177). The state in the poem may have no concern for spiritual or emotional investment, but Auden certainly did. Auden only writes that "He was married and added five children to the population" (*SP* 93).

There is no further mention of his wife, the role she played in his life, or the strength of the relationship. The corporate voice turns marriage into a *pro forma* gesture that is required before breeding the correct number of children. This treatment of marriage robs it of spiritual significance. Auden exposes that which is not spiritual rather than engaging with spirituality.

John Fuller's account of the poem, while an exercise in brevity which reduces "The Unknown Citizen" to a simple anti-bureaucratic poem with "the lightest of ironies" (282), is useful insofar as he notes the play on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. These tombs are an homage to perished soldiers whose bodies could not be identified. Laura Wittman, in her book *The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Modern Mourning, and the Reinvention of the Mystical Body*, explains that the idea had become popular with British, French, and Italian soldiers by 1916, but no official proposals were made until 1918 and the first two tombs (England's Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey and France's *La tombe du soldat inconnu* in the Arc de Triomphe) were not unveiled until Armistice Day (November 11) 1920 (35-6). More significantly, Wittman writes that "The Unknown Soldier's anonymity, in its more radical form, speaks from a 'no place' that is beyond or between what culture can understand; and who speaks here is equally a 'non ego' who questions not just social identities, but psychological and spiritual ones as well" (24). In contrast, this citizen's public identity belongs entirely to the government, as opposed to belonging only to God. The corporate voice, by monumentalizing the citizen, tries to reduce him to impersonality, but it cannot control what the monument *means*. The citizen's monument still achieves a similar "no place," echoing what Wittman observes in the Tombs of the Unknown Soldier. The cracks in the corporate voice are exposed

through the way Auden's irony repurposes the monument. That "The Press are *convinced*" (SP 93, emphasis added) does not necessarily mean the citizen did buy a paper daily. The corporate voice must construct the citizen to its needs, but even as the monument attempts to define him, the citizen resists being defined. The citizen is defined by having "everything necessary to the Modern Man" (93), but the poem fails to address his social identity beyond material issues or that "he was popular with his mates" (93); the governing body within the poem doesn't try to address his psychological state beyond that "he held the proper opinions for the time of year" (93) and makes no attempt whatsoever at addressing the citizen's interior identity. The superficiality of the corporate voice's concerns still allows the monument to the citizen to become ambiguous and unknowable.

The governing body is clearly aware of his working history, his social habits, the opinions of his friends, his financial status, what items he owned and his value to society. In fact, it appears the citizen is very much known to the governing body. The epigraph of the poem reads "*to Js / 07 / m / 378 / This Marble Monument is Erected by the State*" (SP 93). The array of letters and numbers in the epigraph are not unlike a social security number which is replacing the citizen's name and obscuring his personal identity further; the citizen's public identity is meticulously documented. If there is one thing that Auden makes evident throughout the poem, it is that the *State* that found reason to erect the monument also knew every last detail of this citizen's life. Indeed, the amorphous "Bureau of Statistics" has enough information to comfortably claim that "there was no official complaint" (93) against his name. However, for all the information the

government seems to have, there are certainly a number of aspects of his identity that are missing.

The first, and most missed, is the citizen's name. The lack of name is a defining aspect of the citizen's "unknown" status. The citizen is clearly important to the governing body, otherwise the *State* would never have bothered building a monument to him. The monument, however, is certainly not *for* the citizen. It is for all the other citizenry; by focusing on quantitative aspects, the citizen is important because he does not cause any trouble whatsoever; he is a model of economic and social stability to which the other citizens can aspire. To make the citizen into a model, however, the citizen must be stripped of his individuality so as to become generalizable. The citizen must be generic enough that any other citizen can embody the same virtues. Ironically, while the enigmatic Bureau knows exactly who the citizen is, the description afforded the citizen is, and must be, applicable to almost anyone. Even more ironic is the idea that the corporate voice does not know the interior aspects of the citizen. The extensive surveillance capabilities used by the Bureau of Statistics have not yielded everything about the citizen. The citizen is simultaneously a very precise person with a traceable past which the Bureau of Statistics can look up and a person so generalized that a monument to him can be understood as an appreciation of any other average citizen, but also someone unknown even to the corporate voice.

The lack of name, however, has a more sinister implication; it coincides with the other aspects that the Bureau of Statistics chooses to neglect: freedom and happiness. Auden leaves the thought until the very end of the poem, but the repercussions of those last lines are great:

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:

Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard. (*SP* 93)

The speaker is not concerned with implications beyond quantitative evidence. That the citizen “was in hospital once but left cured,” and “was married and added five children to the population” (*SP* 93), along with the rest of the list of exterior aspects the speaker uses to enumerate the value of the citizen, are all the proof of an effective citizen that the Bureau needs. Rather than try to answer whether or not the citizen had lived a happy life, the state would try to make the question absurd by relying entirely on exterior aspects of his life. The corporate voice does not even feel a need to address spirituality (or any other internal concerns for that matter).

Auden, however, wants to turn our attention to precisely those things. It is for this precise reason that “The Unknown Citizen” presents readers with an apparently unspiritual world. By this mode, the voids in the poem become far more significant than the presences. The exterior data that the corporate voice is concerned with is shallow. What is unsaid is the corporate voice’s lack of awareness of spirituality. It is precisely the material aspects that the speaker has ironized. The citizen was an effective contributor to society in a myriad of ways; from “[working] in a factory and never [getting] fired” to paying his union dues (*SP* 93), it is evident that the citizen provided a positive contribution to his society’s economy. This is further reinforced by the fact that he had “A gramophone, a radio, a car and a Frigidaire” (93). The poem ironically portrays the mundane stability afforded by the citizen’s life as positive. The extreme emphasis on material value begins to commoditize the citizen, who, in order to live up to his status as

a Modern Man, must participate in the production monopolies emphasized by capitalization (Fudge Motors, High-Grade Living, Producer's Research).

The problematic issue of individuality in the citizen is constructed through his relationships. His "mates" are left unnamed and are given no agency with which to explain their own feelings about the citizen. We are given no window into the citizen's relationship with his wife or children. The problem does not reside with the citizen, but with how the speaker constructs the citizen. Thus, any chance for the citizen to display spirituality is left unrealized. That is not to say that the citizen, or Auden, is incapable of spirituality; the proto-spiritual power of the poem resides in the way the poem leaves gaps for spiritual potential. The citizen could even be Auden, embodying Richard Bozorth's point, that Auden is critiquing his own complicity as a citizen who is aware of problems but unwilling to struggle for change (71).

Writing "The Unknown Citizen" the same year as he arrived in the U.S., Auden left behind one depression-era culture to find another; Auden entered a society that was mostly concerned with creating economic stability, as John Steele Gordon notes that unemployment reached 23.6 percent in 1932 and remained above 14 percent until 1941 (324, 328, 346). While this is certainly a reason to be concerned about economic status and job security, a concern with economic conditions certainly does not justify the abandonment of spiritual (or even ethical) principle. Auden only amplifies this concern throughout "The Unknown Citizen." The preoccupation with economic stability that the monument represents cannot be disentangled from either the citizen or those who governed him. It appears that the citizen is selling out for a simple and stable life. He has surrendered his willpower to the government, or, most likely the citizen is being

constructed as complicit; in any case, the government is exerting influence to maintain the status quo of a system that is disinterested in spirituality.

The hints of spirituality in "The Unknown Citizen," implied by the ironic treatment of the speaker's materialistic view, allow Auden to criticize the non-spiritual modern world without actually introducing religious themes. For all that "The Unknown Citizen" uses secular material, it criticizes a lack of spiritual thinking. Even as Auden professed a resistance to the possibility of the supernatural, he saw value in employing the spiritual guidance of Christ, as evidenced earlier in *The Prolific and The Devourer*. This proto-spirituality will develop further in Auden's poetry as he contextualizes spirituality within a secular world in "For the Time Being."

Chapter 2: Secularized Christmas

“For the Time Being,”ⁱⁱⁱ subtitled “A Christmas Oratorio,” picks up the spiritual criticism constructed in “The Unknown Citizen” and builds into a spiritual exploration, imagining secular contexts in terms of spiritual verse. The poem also reveals concern for personal issues and was surely affected by Auden’s religious shift in late 1939. By the time he had started writing “For the Time Being” in 1941, Auden had converted to the Episcopal Church. Auden finished work on the poem in 1942 under the presumption that it would be set to music, but that hope was never realized (*Later Auden* 179-80); instead Auden published the poem in *For the Time Being* in 1944 along with “The Sea and the Mirror.” The poem may never have fulfilled its original purpose, to be set to music, but Auden crafts a very complicated understanding of spirituality. It is a poem affected by his relationship with his mother. Chester Kallman is also a major factor in the poem’s construction; Auden’s relationship with Kallman became very complicated before and during the period when Auden wrote “For the Time Being.” The poem provides a catharsis for his concerns about Kallman through his rediscovered Christian beliefs. Auden places his personal demons and spiritual explorations into the context of the Bible by wrapping a secular, modern setting around the Nativity.

The principle structure of the poem consists of the Nativity story that has been framed by Auden’s secular, modern era, which is mostly voiced through the narrator. The poem quickly shifts into a quasi-biblical realm for most of the body. However, the poem’s biblical space contains many anachronistic references to modernity, uprooting the poem from a single understanding of its temporal placement. Auden uses a number of terms to distinguish the secular and the spiritual, particularly in “The Meditation of

Simeon,” where Simeon refers to them as the finite and the Infinite, the temporal and the Eternal, the conditional and the Unconditional and a number of other ways. The chorus opens the first section, “Advent,” where the narrator, chorus and semi-chorus take turns elucidating the state of humanity, which has been afflicted with war, the beginning of winter, and its own fallen-ness, and begins to anticipate the reaffirmation of the Nativity.

^{iv} These first passages open the frame of the poem, which is mostly described by the narrator and the chorus. The final two passages of “The Flight into Egypt” comprise the other half of the frame, where the narrator discusses the difficulties of faith even immediately following the potentially revitalizing reaffirmation of the Nativity. The final passages are critical of the glamorization of Christmas by using objects, like broken ornaments and a kitchen table that needs to be scrubbed of the celebration’s debris, to confront the mundane difficulties of faith. The frame is secular, but because it frames an immanent Nativity, both the frame and the Nativity story contained within are able to transcend their boundaries. The Nativity is more than a Bible story and the frame is more than Auden’s Christmas experience. The way the poem reaffirms the Nativity also reaffirms importance of both the secular and the spiritual.

Auden presents readers immediately with one of the primary inspirations of the poem; he dedicates the poem “In memoriam / Constance Rosalie Auden / 1870-1941” (*CLP* 131). That Auden dedicated the poem to his mother is a gesture towards the influence she had on his faith; Carpenter reports that Auden’s mother “was a deeply believing Christian” and “taught [Auden] to enjoy churchgoing” (6). Auden’s estrangement from Christianity in his teenage years created a lot of tension between him and his mother. He did not return to Christianity until shortly before writing “For the

Time Being,” decades after he had left the Church. His re-conversion was a slow process which he had thought through carefully and is certainly present in the poem.

The epigraph under the dedication is a quotation from Romans VI, reading “*What shall we say then? Shall we continue / in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid*” (CLP 131). Auden chose the quotation because it is infused with the faith and devotion that his mother’s Christian ideals desired. Carpenter points out that “The first [purpose of “For the Time Being”] was that it should be a memorial to his mother” (320). That he memorialized his mother in the dedication could have been a token gesture of kindness, but considering his mother’s devout faith and recent death, as well as Auden’s recent reconversion when he wrote the poem, the dedication is more spiritual than a simple gesture.

Jarrell categorizes “For the Time Being” as part of Auden’s “Paul” stage, where “everything important happens in the Realm of Grace” (158), arguing that in this phase Auden attacks his own previous stage of ideology. Jarrell feels that Auden had left behind the secular to adopt a deterministic “Christian optimism” which believes that “everything (except the Wholly Other, God) is evil” (158). However, Auden has not left behind the secular at all. The categories which Jarrell uses to define Auden’s ideology for “The Unknown Citizen” are still present in “For the Time Being” with the possible exception of science. “For the Time Being” is grounded with secular, and sometimes anachronistic, objects and ideas to ensure the poem’s spiritual affirmations are relevant to secular contexts. The way Auden constructs the spiritual within the secular makes them inseparable.

The simultaneity of the secular and spiritual is reinforced throughout the poem. C. G. Jung's four faculties, based on his twentieth century psychological theory, occupy the same space as the Angel Gabriel. That they descend together reinforces the simultaneous reaffirmation of both secular and spiritual. The faculties and Gabriel shift the trajectory of the poem toward spirituality by informing Mary of her opportunity to bear God's child in the second section, "The Annunciation." The third section, "The Temptation of St. Joseph," continues this trend by setting anachronisms throughout Joseph's journey while detailing his trials coping with what he perceives to be Mary's infidelity.

After "The Summons," "The Vision of the Shepherds," and "At the Manger," Simeon extemporizes on the power of God, the necessity of faith and the implications of those powers in "The Meditation of Simeon." During this process, he explicitly approaches the simultaneity of the finite and the infinite, rephrasing Auden's own spiritual concerns and mirroring the way the poem uses a modern context to reaffirm the Nativity. Auden makes the eighth section interesting by attributing a rational humanist perspective to the tyrant Herod in "The Massacre of the Innocents." In this section Auden returns to using anachronisms to reinforce the way the poem creates value in both the secular and the spiritual. The final section, "The Flight into Egypt," concludes the poem with Joseph and Mary's passage to Egypt, then returning the poem to modernity, thus sealing the frame of the poem and dwelling on the difficulties of maintaining faith in the face of the everyday grind. The way the frame encapsulates the Nativity reaffirms that the secular and the spiritual cannot be disentangled from each other

The way the poem encapsulates spirituality in the secular is best understood through its final passages. Though the poem's frame opens to a completely fallen state in

the first section, the close of the frame in the final section is neither entirely ideal nor entirely fallen:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
Some have got broken—and carrying them up into the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
...
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen... (*CLP* 195)

By shifting the poem out of the extraordinary Nativity and into an ordinary post-Christmas modernity, Auden extends the value of a unique spiritual event and attaches it to an exclusively secular and contemporary context. Auden makes the mundane, secular context stronger throughout the passage; the difficulties of coping with relatives do not negate the value of the Nativity's reaffirmation. As normalcy ensues after the Nativity is over and the ornaments head to the attic, the spiritual value of the Nativity seems to fade into the concerns of the average life; the narrator confronts the issue that "once again we have sent Him away, / Begging though to remain his disobedient servant" (*CLP* 195). Mendelson distills these final moments as follows: "The comedy of the narrator's disillusionment shades imperceptibly into a profound evocation of the ordinary difficulty of faith in a world where the Christmas decorations have been put back in their boxes...and not even the slightest afterglow improves daily 'existence'" (*Later Auden* 193). The difficulty of faith is certainly evident, yet Mendelson's willingness to write off the Nativity's value beyond the celebration of Christmas ignores the implicit truth that in a year all of the Christmas ornaments and spirit will return. Indeed, to argue that the secular cannot be improved by the spiritual negates the middle sections of the poem.

Nonetheless, as Auden grounds the narrator in the mundane observation that "the kitchen table exists because I scrub it" (*CLP* 195), it is easy to let the large list of secular chores and annoyances overcome the spirituality of the middle sections; from the "bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair, / Irregular verbs to learn" to the realization that "The happy morning is over, / The night of agony is still to come" (196), Auden ensures that the "the Time Being" is neither overly easy nor particularly interesting. He makes the case that "The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all" (196), reinforcing

that the secular world is a difficult place to maintain faith. Defining “the Time Being” is itself a problematic task even before attempting to rescue it from insignificance. The phrase refers to a moment that is simultaneously ever-present and constantly elusive. It can be captured in words or images, but never again experienced. The idea of making “the Time Being” significant is not only thoroughly abstract, but also entirely subjective.

However, “the Time Being” also encapsulates the spiritual. Because it is constantly present, it becomes part of the way the poem maintains the relevance of the Nativity and spirituality. But, in turn, “the Time Being” must also contain all that is not spiritual. This idea is developed further by the narrator’s point that

We look round for something, no matter what, to inhibit
Our self-reflection, and the obvious thing for that purpose
Would be some great suffering. So, once we have met the Son,
We are tempted ever after to pray to the Father:

‘Lead us into temptation and evil for our sake’. (*CLP* 196)

Instead of the traditional prayer to “Lead us not into temptation,” Auden inverts the prayer so that temptation and sin become methods to distract from the difficulties of keeping faith, but there is still a “Time Being to redeem / From insignificance” (196) through discipline and spirituality.

The sudden modernity is arguably the most spiritual moment because the narrator, even as he wrestles with the most boring of life’s requirements, ultimately advocates faith: “He is the way / ... / He is the Truth / ... / He is the Life” (196-97). However, these secular, mundane aspects become important because it is only by weathering these tasks that humanity can understand the eternal within the temporal, appreciate that which is

beyond the mundane. The narrator's final lines are full of potential for humanity's spirituality, but this potential is tempered by an awareness of the responsibility which spirituality requires and by the silence of God:

When the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing
 Without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure
 A silence that is neither for nor against her faith
 That God's Will will be done, that, in spite of her prayers,
 God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph. (*CLP* 196)

The Spirit embodies man's internal spiritual quest and the poem argues that spirituality must be realized in solitude; no one can critique a person's internal spiritual discussions. The Spirit has room to create happiness without judgment and, though the perceived lack of audience can feel unsettling, Auden gives the Spirit room to grow through internal reflection. The scales are the principles of spirituality; few people willingly practice scales on an instrument thoroughly, yet the foundational nature of understanding scales make for a much more capable musician. Similarly, a strong Spirit must be honed with discipline and practice, but the poem also leaves room for those who will not "practice scales." The Soul is given similar room to have faith without judgment, but also experiences a silence which has the potential to stifle faith; the Soul feels an ambivalence towards her own faith, leaving the potential to break under the silence and abandon spirituality. Auden uses the Spirit and the Soul to embody the tension between maintaining spirituality and the ease of complacency, but neither the Spirit nor the Soul clearly present a solution. Both the Spirit and the Soul encounter a lack of reason to maintain faith, yet spirituality is the more difficult, more rewarding option.

The opening of the frame presents a much grimmer situation. Before addressing the plot of the Nativity directly, Auden begins the cycle of the poem with a fallen world where “The evil and armed draw near; / The weather smells of their hate / And the houses smell of our fear” (135). By the end of the poem this will become a spiritual world where “He is the Life. / Love Him in the World of the Flesh; / And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy” (*CLP* 197). That ideal, however, must be set aside initially in order for the intensity and spirituality of the poem to grow. The first section begins with a chorus and semi-chorus who tell of their despair in the first part of “Advent.” The chorus operates exclusively in fourteen line stanzas and employs an eclectic rhyme scheme. The first line is repeated in the sixth and fourteenth lines, where the sixth line always adds “as” to the front of the line. The third line always rhymes with these lines, and the other lines are consistently paired with another non-adjacent line. They strictly follow *a-b-a-c-d-a-e-c-b-e-f-d-f-a*:

Darkness and snow descend;
 The clock on the mantelpiece
 Has nothing to recommend,
 Nor does the face in the glass
 Appear nobler than our own
 As darkness and snow descend
 On all personality.
 Huge crowds mumble—‘Alas,
 Our angers do not increase,
 Love is not what she used to be;’

Portly Caesar yawns—"I know;"
 He falls asleep on his throne,
 They shuffle off through the snow:
 Darkness and snow descend. (133)

The strictness with which Auden uses this structure imparts a uniformity of the chorus, which strengthened by Auden's nearly absolute consistency in his use of meter. This uniformity makes more concrete the idea that the chorus is a nameless, faceless population. The first stanza in the poem affirms that a spiritual collapse has already occurred. If the winter weather is obscuring "all personality," it is evident Auden intends the "Huge crowds," who are dismayed that "Love is not what she used to be" (*CLP* 133), to be a feature of the landscape. They can no more escape the snow than the "Portly Caesar" to whom the crowds briefly look before they "shuffle off through the snow" (133). These first choruses in particular seem dispirited, lacking energy to the point where the crowd's "angers do not increase" (133) at their circumstances.

The semi-chorus does not follow a consistent form like the chorus, but bolsters the concerns voiced by the chorus: "Outside the civil garden / Of every day love there / Crouches a wild passion / To destroy and be destroyed" (134). But where the chorus seems interested in a collapse of society, where "plans have all gone awry, / The rains will arrive too late, / Our resourceful general / Fell down dead as he drank" (135), the semi-chorus is discussing latent issues, like the mysterious and destructive wild passion and the fate of the subjects' souls, "cast into the void" (134). The Advent season is filled with a familiar desire to be freed from the circumstances that Auden's microcosm of society is facing.

Auden also begins extensively using anachronisms, putting a clock and mantelpiece in the same stanza as Caesar. The continual use of anachronism throughout the poem resists a simple understanding of faith or religion. In a letter to his father Auden explains that he “was trying to treat [the Nativity] as a religious event which eternally recurs every time it is accepted” (“Perhaps you”). Rather than understanding the shepherds only as shepherds, Auden would have the shepherds become representative of the humbler people of the world (“Perhaps you”). In doing so, Auden reaffirms the constant recurrence of the Nativity. But, in order for the poem to grow into spirituality and understanding, Auden must start with a fallen vision.

The narrator, who takes up the entirety of the second part of “Advent,” provides the first shift in the poem, bringing the poem farther away from spirituality. The narrator describes the current state of society through conditional statements: “If all sailings have been cancelled till further notice” to “if, / Under the subnormal temperatures prevailing, / The two sexes are at present the weak and the strong” (*CLP* 135). The adversity the world is facing renders traditional gender constructions immaterial; society is more concerned with a person’s strength than his or her sex. But the narrator continues, saying “That is not at all unusual for this time of year” (135). The narrator goes through another litany of difficulties, “Flood, fire, / The desiccation of grasslands, restraint of princes, / Piracy on the high seas, physical pain and fiscal grief” (135), but comes to the same conclusion, that “These after all are our familiar tribulations, / And we have been through them all before, many, many times” (135). The narrator justifies these issues as part of a cyclical trend, where “They occur again and again but only to pass / Again and again into their formal opposites, / From sword to ploughshare, coffin to cradle, War to work”

(136). These cycles embody the shifts through which spirituality must be maintained, in spite of adversity.

The very secular and fallen point of reference is rendered as part of the normal human experience. However, humanity's fallen state only seems to become worse: "That was a moment ago, / Before an outrageous novelty had been introduced into our lives" (136). Auden leaves the novelty unnamed, but clarifies it as being "as if / We had left our house for five minutes to mail a letter, / And during that time the living room had changed places / With the room behind the mirror over the fireplace" (*CLP* 136). The room is not actually changing that much; the objects in the room remain the same as reflections of themselves. The utility and function of the objects in the room also remain the same. What changes is the perspective of the person experiencing the room. Auden then makes this sensation more explicit: "the world of space where events re-occur is still there, / Only now it is no longer real; the real one is nowhere" (137). Auden is adding weight to the shift in perspective. The narrator develops the feeling of godlessness further, claiming that "our true existence / Is decided by no one and has no importance to love" (137). The narrator's final stanza of "Advent" constructs the space to move away from: "even / The violent howling of winter and war has become / Like a juke-box tune that we dare not stop. We are afraid / Of pain but more afraid of silence... /...This is the wrath of God" (137). Before the outrageous novelty there is no mention of divine intervention; God's presence seems to be taken on faith. The new lack of godly presence indicates the lack of spirituality and a low point in the poem.

The chorus develops the fallen state of humanity further in the third part of "Advent," maintaining a strict form of *a-b-b-a-a* throughout; the repetition of the first

line in the final line of each stanza reifies the doubts and concerns of the undefined population because the concerns voiced are the concerns of a fallen people. The nameless sea of people is given a voice, and they share the doubts of the narrator, but they are more selfish: "Where is that Law for which we broke our own" (137). They feel betrayed; the population has even lost faith in the traditional pilgrimages, unable to feel any spiritual connection in spite of the formerly assumed holiness of the pilgrimage's destination: "The Pilgrim Way has led to the Abyss, / Was it to meet such grinning evidence / We left our richly odoured ignorance?" (*CLP* 137).^v The faceless masses are as aware of the shift as the narrator is, but they make concrete their selfish, fallen status in the final stanza of the part:

We who must die demand a miracle.
How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible:
We who must die demand a miracle. (138)

The chorus expresses how dire their circumstances are and their desire to be saved with unwavering resolve; since the incursion of God's wrath is beyond their ken, anything capable of saving them must also be. The audacity of the demand for a miracle is itself surprising, an aspect of their selfish nature, but a clear product of their fallen state. The next part, a recitative, calls the sin to our attention: "As long as the self can say 'I,' it is impossible not to rebel" (138). While the chorus never strictly says "I," the statements are rooted in self-preservation. They demand (not request, beg, plead or hope for) a miracle

not for any greater good, but because they want to be saved. The chorus fails to offer a reason why they should be saved beyond their conceited desire to live.

Auden finally shifts the poem in a spiritual direction in "The Annunciation." The section's first part opens with the four faculties (Intuition, Feeling, Sensation and Thought) explaining their roles in temptation after the fall of man, but it is Gabriel who creates a spiritual moment. Gabriel reintroduces the idea of Love into the poem while addressing Mary:

Hear, child, what I am sent to tell:

Love wills your dream to happen, so

Love's will on earth may be, through you,

No longer a pretend but true. (*CLP* 145)

Where the chorus previously lamented that "Love is not what she used to be" (133), Love's will becomes true again. The reintroduction of Love, as well as the presence of an Angel, indicate a return of God, divinity and spirituality.

Auden makes the tension between temptation of complacency and difficulty of spirituality concrete with "The Temptation of St. Joseph," the third section of "For the Time Being." Auden opens the section with a burst of anachronisms; if the faculties and Gabriel manage to largely operate outside the scope of temporality, Joseph is firmly set in the modern era with shined shoes, cleaned and pressed pants and an intervening police force. The anachronisms situate Joseph in a space that is not particularly biblical, making him easier to connect to. All of this is made concrete by Auden's admission that "Joseph...is me" (*Carpenter* 313). Auden's projection of himself into Joseph inserts a personal issue into a biblical context, transforming Auden's frustration with Kallman's

promiscuity into a cathartic revision of a biblical story. Auden's own admission makes Joseph more than an analogue to the biblical Joseph, turning Auden's personal experience into a revision of Joseph's story. The anachronisms enhance the transformation of Auden's experience into Joseph's situation. Auden felt his relationship with Kallman was going through a crisis that tested his faith, eventually coming to feel that Kallman's unfaithful and promiscuous behavior was "a trial that God had imposed" (Carpenter 316). Adding to the intensity is the chorus, playing up all of Joseph's insecurities. The chorus seems to reflect the torments of a trial, attempting to generate doubt in Joseph:

Joseph, you have heard

What Mary says occurred;

Yes, it may be so.

Is it likely? No.

...

Mary may be pure,

But, Joseph, are you sure?

How is one to tell?

Suppose, for instance... Well... (CLP 149)

The chorus is unrelenting, provoking any insecurities Joseph may have about infidelity and channeling the criticism Auden might have leveled at himself. Auden's uses trimeter, four line stanzas, and a simple *a-a-b-b* rhyme scheme to imbue the chorus's taunts with a childish, sing-song quality that intensifies how aggravating each stanza is. Auden also uses no specific detail in the chorus's taunts, and by doing so not only makes the taunts

more applicable to anyone experiencing jealousy, but also allows the jealous mind to fill in the blanks with perceived worst-case scenarios.

Joseph's devotion to Mary also parallels Auden's concern for Kallman. In January 1942, after Auden had already begun composing the poem, he wrote to Caroline Newton, professing an "anxiety for [Kallman's] spiritual welfare" (315). Kallman's promiscuity, which Auden clearly knew about, is not a perfect analogue to Mary's suspected infidelity; however, it does present a situation in which both Auden and Joseph want to have faith and weather the situation with their partner. Joseph's behavior certainly indicates this desire. Throughout the section he refers to Mary as "My own true Love" three times (*CLP* 149-50). Joseph does not lose faith, going through a number of trials before he appeals to a higher power:

Through cracks, up ladders, into waters deep,

I squeezed, I climbed, I swam to save

My own true Love:

...

A hermit sat in the mouth of a cave:

When I asked him the way,

He pretended to be asleep. (150)

Auden's Joseph displays dedication for his task, carrying through in spite of the chorus's taunting interjections. The only figure available to ask for help is a hermit who would not converse, evidencing that no other person can give Joseph the answer to his questions.

Auden imagines his own trials in a metaphor using Joseph's hardships, realizing his own

internal spiritual quest through Joseph. The spirituality of Joseph's situation rests in the perseverance and reflection he undertakes in the face of doubt and adversity.

Joseph's perseverance is rewarded before the end of the poem; Joseph and Mary reach the desert in "The Flight into Egypt." Auden also continues using anachronism through the mysterious voices of the desert to maintain the instability manufactured earlier:

Come to our well run-desert

Where anguish arrives by cable,

And the deadly sins

May be bought in tins

With instructions on the label. (193)

Cables, labels, and tins are all first conceived well after the birth of Christ. These objects also indicate an excess and self-indulgence, signifying a society that can afford to cable emotions, packs of abstract ideas, and labelled goods liberally. This decadence is presented through the evident availability of the sins. While the desert may be well run, it is also a source of ambiguity. Joseph and Mary's desert refuge is harsh and predictably pre-packaged but also offers safety. It maintains the complicated relationship Auden has with faith; with or without faith, maintaining and exploring spirituality in the face of life's difficulties is taxing. The safety of the desert is a double edged sword; it can provide safety, but it also tests the will of the faithful with temptation.^{vi}

Auden interjects into the poem other sobering moments at the end of "The Summons." A Fugal-Chorus sings a sarcastic praise of industrial development, convinced that "Spirit is no longer under our Flesh, but on top" (CLP 162). The members of the

Fugal-Chorus have allowed internal spiritual value to be replaced with secular superficiality. The Fugal-Chorus echoes the lack of individuality found in "The Unknown Citizen," where a person's value and importance are determined by exterior traits. The sarcastic tone of the passage renders the soul valuable, criticizing those who value the exterior. The narrator, meanwhile, provides another upward turn. He temporarily returns the frame back to the contemporary, claiming that "History is in the making; Mankind is on the march" (163). While the poem reiterates the fallen status of mankind, saying "We know we are not unlucky but evil, / That the dream of a Perfect State or No State... / ...is part of our punishment" (*CLP* 163), Auden ends the passage on a higher note, anticipating the revelation which Simeon will afford. The narrator offers hope that "the Kingdom of Heaven may come, not in our present / And not in our future, but in the Fullness of Time" (163). The "Fullness of Time" is the eternal counterpart to the finite "Time Being," but because of the cyclic structure of the poem and the impossibility of escaping "the Time Being," the "Fullness of Time" is instead another way of understanding "the Time Being." Nonetheless, the narrator's cautious hope is a far cry from his earlier negative assertion that "our true existence / Is decided by no one and has no importance to love" (137); the turn towards prayer signals that the contemporary era is capable of engaging with the spiritual. Following the narrator's hopeful resolution, the following two sections, "The Vision of the Shepherds" and "At the Manger," continue to develop a cautious, if un-polarizing, movement towards spirituality.

"The Meditation of Simeon" shows Auden's exploration of faith. Auden chose Simeon, the priest who receives the infant Jesus after forty days to perform a rite of mitzvah (*King James Version*, Luke: 2:25-35; Exodus 13:12-16), to elucidate the

relationship between humanity and the return of God. Simeon is the first character to speak entirely in prose; combined with his perspective of hindsight, it endows him with a patient clarity. Carpenter describes Simeon as “[retracing] the intellectual and emotional experiences through which Auden had passed on his quest for the Absolute” (322).

Simeon’s musings anticipate the tension that the Spirit and the Soul address by coming to the conclusion that “our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to Him who is always and everywhere present” (*CLP* 183-84). Simeon is sure of himself and of God’s presence, but the tension between maintaining a spiritual life and the ease of a complacent life is realized through the recounting of humanity’s shortcomings.

Simeon’s conclusion places God at the center of existence, but more spiritual is his process of coming to that conclusion; it is through consideration of a lengthy human history that he can gain the comfort of divine presence.

Thus before Simeon can come to this conclusion, he must ruminate on past ideologies, motivations, and false hopes. He begins with the thought that “there was still a hope that the effects of the poison would wear off, that the exile from paradise was only a bad dream” (*CLP* 178). This hope, however, is quickly shrugged off for another, “that Paradise was not an eternal state from which [Adam] had been forever expelled, but a childish state which he had permanently outgrown, that the Fall had occurred by necessity” (178). Simeon’s first theme is one of regression. The first three hopes all look back to the Fall, either for a way to reverse or negate it, as though “some antidote might be found, that the gates of Paradise had indeed slammed to, but...could be unlocked” (179).

Simeon painstakingly describes the conditions in which God could be manifest, explaining that

Before the Infinite could manifest Itself in the finite, it was necessary that man should first have reached that point along his road of knowledge where...in order to proceed at all, he must decide which is Real and which is only Appearance, yet at the same time cannot escape the knowledge that his choice is arbitrary. (179-80)

Simeon shows one of humanity's dilemmas: being trapped between the conflicts of observed reality and a perceived Godly presence. In order to fully realize faith, Auden knows that not all phenomena can be rationalized away. In this way, Simeon is another avenue by which Auden constructs the context of "For the Time Being" as an exploration of spirituality.

Simeon also makes the argument that "because of His visitation, we may no longer desire God as if He were lacking" (*CLP* 183), a statement which makes concrete the presence of God. The faithful are granted further security if Simeon is to be believed: "at every moment we pray that, following Him, we may depart from our anxiety into His peace" (184). This statement does initially seem paradoxical; if every moment is spent praying to depart from anxiety towards peace, then at every moment one would be between anxiety and peace, never truthfully reaching the goal of God's peace. Rather than seeing it as a paradox, it is a constant spiritual effort; God's peace cannot simply be rested in, but requires a consistent depth and self-reflection of humanity's subjects in order to be realized. Either way, Simeon's speech lacks the temporally grounding

anachronisms that the narrator and Joseph experience; while Simeon spends a great deal of time discussing the combining of infinite and finite, his speech never embodies the infinite-finite dichotomy. The lack of anachronism does not undermine Simeon's ability to comment on the situation; on the contrary, it places him in a more objective space that allows Simeon to address humanity broadly and effectively without the pessimistic tone of the narrator.

Enter Herod, whose speech contains many anachronisms, reinforcing Herod's role as a secular figure. Not one to leave Simeon's decisively spiritual conclusion to rest unchallenged, Auden juxtaposes the pious Simeon with Herod's speech in "The Massacre of the Innocents." Herod's monologue in "For the Time Being" provides potentially the most ironic moment in the poem: in trying to save people from themselves, Herod would kill the one person who can save all humanity. Auden chooses to diverge from the simple path of portraying Herod as a bloodthirsty tyrant to realize his own intellectual journey in the terms of Herod's predicament; Herod could have justified calling in the army as a gesture to retain his power, leaving no complications for him to dwell on. Auden's take is quite the opposite. Auden's Herod *believes* he is saving people from themselves. Herod focuses on the secular to try to validate his perspective, but the attempt falls flat. Herod's inability to transcend rationalization makes him a complex foil to Simeon and the spiritual communion undertaken by the rest of the poem's speakers.

Herod attempts to justify his litany of honors as though the weight of his responsibilities warrant such a ritualistic approach to his decision-making process: "Because I am bewildered, because I must decide, because my decision must be in conformity with Nature and Necessity, let me honour those through whom my nature is

by necessity what it is" (*CLP* 185). The reflection on his responsibility and the desire to commemorate those who shaped him reveals a sentimentality, but Herod never gets past the sentiment. Herod exemplifies the process of criticizing what is unspiritual rather than engaging with the spiritual, beginning with the decision to credit Fortune with his success. That the pressure of making a decision has him bewildered immediately constructs Herod as insecure; this is reinforced by "Miss Button" who "[admits] that [Herod's] speeches were inaudible" (*CLP* 185). It does not speak well of a leader that he cannot make himself heard.

More disconcerting than his insecurity is the first entry on the litany of commemorations he goes through: "To Fortune—that I have become Tetrarch, that I have escaped assassination, that at sixty my head is clear and my digestion sound" (185). Fortune is the quasi-goddess whom men praise when events go well and denigrate when endeavors turn sour. Crediting her with his success indicates he does not reflect on what made him successful and implies Herod would rather rely on chance than faith. Mendelson claims Herod is someone who "cannot imagine [the Nativity] as a universal absolute, only as an apotheosis of individual uniqueness" (*Later Auden* 191), another aspect which Herod could certainly assign to Fortune since the virgin birth of God's son can't be rationalized. Nonetheless, the choice to grant Fortune the credit for these defining aspects of his character places him squarely opposite Simeon.

Herod continues his argument by exulting his own city, inflating his own value and drawing attention to the danger Christ poses:

There is no visible disorder. No crime—what could be more innocent than the birth of an artisan's child? Today has been one of

those perfect winter days...and as I stand at this window high up in the citadel there is nothing in the whole magnificent panorama of plain and mountains to indicate that the Empire is threatened by a danger more dreadful than any invasion of Tartars on racing camels or conspiracy of the Praetorian Guard

Barges are unloading soil fertilizer at the river wharves.

Soft drinks and sandwiches may be had in the inns at reasonable prices. Allotment gardening has become popular. The highway to the coast goes straight up over the mountains...there are women of forty who have never hidden in a ditch except for fun. (*CLP* 185-86)

Herod uses the state of his city to strengthen his position preemptively while admitting, with a reasonable sense of humility, the innocence of the child. His rhetorical position is hampered by two things. The first is this “artisan’s child” who Herod believes is a potentially catastrophic threat. The second is the public he will spend the rest of his speech railing against. It is as if Herod frontloads an overwhelming amount of success in order to justify fallacies he will later employ. In order to frame his argument against the barbarians, he must provide indisputable evidence that his subjects should be content with the economy and security afforded by his leadership. Herod fails to account for the fact that the secular alone could leave him unfulfilled. While his city affords safety and prosperity, the only offered evidence of a content society is the presence of women who hide in ditches for fun; a number of blithe encounters with a lover do not necessarily make for a fulfilled society. Herod takes up the corporate concerns of “The Unknown

Citizen” for exterior and material issues; surely people should not need faith or spirituality if they have financial security. Herod does not realize that these secular aspects of life are not entirely fulfilling for everyone. His own lack of spirituality ultimately frustrates him when presented with people who embrace the spiritual.

It is after this brief proof validating his own perspective that he immediately starts spiraling down, beginning with the problem that “There isn’t a single town where a good bookshop would pay” (*CLP* 186). Since Herod’s earlier proof distinctly relies on peace afforded by economic stability, it can safely be said that lack of cash flow is not the root problem; the region has the wealth to support a bookshop from Herod’s description. While the economy can support demand for books, there is no cultural demand for them. Herod perceives a lack of education beyond his city and thus his idea that a “good bookshop” won’t be supported by consumer interest. Herod laments the lack of education and the fact that “One could count on the fingers of one hand the people capable of solving the problem of Achilles and the Tortoise” (186), but he also fails to offer any solution to the problem he sees. Rather than developing a response to try to educate more of his subjects, he begins attacking “those immense areas of barbaric night” surrounding his city (186). Herod, once again, fails to regard whether or not people are fulfilled. Herod is assuming an educated people is a fulfilled people (or at the very least should be), but he is still unable to see past his own secular concerns.

Herod dives further into fallacy, blaming the lack of education on Christ. It is difficult to trust his increasingly hyperbolic rhetoric. When he says “Knowledge will degenerate into a riot of subjective visions... Whole cosmogonies will be created out of some forgotten personal resentment” (*CLP* 188), Herod now blames Christ for a societal

degeneration that he assumes will happen. His fear that "Idealism will be replaced by Materialism" is made ridiculous by the extent to which he believes his own assertion, that "Divine honours will be paid to silver teapots, shallow depressions in the earth, names on maps, domestic pets, ruined windmills, even in extreme cases, which will become increasingly common, to headaches, or malignant tumors, or four o'clock in the afternoon" (189). Since none of this has actually happened yet, his hypotheses are groundless. Herod believes that "Every crook will argue: 'I like committing crime. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged'" (189), continuing his baseless argument by responding to the quote Auden uses for the epigraph.^{vii} Herod asserts that sinners would believe that God's grace would actually be infinite and would exploit a forgiving God. That "the general, the statesman, and the philosopher [will] have become the butt of every farce and satire" (189) is another fallacy; the fallacies indicate a willingness to demonize those he can't communicate with and an inability to reflect on the implications of his own arguments; his fallacy-ridden monologue begins to undermine some of his humanist charm.

Herod's criticism is also not limited to what lies outside his city: "even inside this little civilized patch itself...so many are still homesick for that disorder wherein every passion formerly enjoyed a frantic license" (*CLP* 187). He even begins criticizing the wealthy and educated, noting that "Caesar flies to his hunting lodge pursued by ennui" and "in the faubourgs of the Capital, Society grows savage, corrupted by silks and scents, softened by sugar and hot water, made insolent by theatres and attractive slaves" (187). These are possibly social issues, but their relevance to the birth of Jesus is vague at best. That the wealthy find ways to waste time and spend money seems a fact exclusive of

faith, which makes Herod's argument a vilification of the current social climate rather than a criticism of the current status of faith. Nonetheless, Herod provides a voice with which Auden can criticize the superficial spirituality of the upper classes; Arthur C. Kirsch noted how, in a 1941 review, "Auden chided the 'prudery' of 'cultured people, to whom...theological terms were far more shocking than any of the four-letter words'"(xi). Caesar, evading ennui, is part of the upper class problem. He has the wealth for a personal hunting lodge, yet rather than use his additional wealth to benefit society, he falls victim to boredom. Auden's formal return to the Anglican faith through the Episcopal Church in 1940 is further indicative of his concern with spirituality in the culture around him.

Herod wants the denizens of his city to act in a purely rational fashion; he wants them to behave like the unknown citizen: acquiescent to order and moderate in opinion. But, as in "The Unknown Citizen," there is room in Herod's mind for spirituality so long as he does not see it turning people into "barbarians." In spite of this, Herod cannot escape this new holy presence in his world and, as Herod puts it, "Legislation is helpless against the wild prayer of longing" (*CLP* 187). Herod's willingness to legislate against faith (in spite of the legislation's failure to change anything) exposes him as utterly unable to empathize with spirituality.

Herod is trying to come to terms with the fact that faith has an uncontrollable presence. But, as Miriam K. Starkman writes, "Herod both celebrates and illustrates the 'rational' way. To him the new prophecy is mad, dangerous, uncivilized, and absurd" (285). But Herod also attaches any superstitious activity to the prophecy. Herod laments, "How can I expect the masses to be sensible when...the captain of my own guard wears

an amulet against the Evil Eye, and the richest merchants in the city consult a medium over every important transaction?" (*CLP* 187). Herod remains unable to empathize with those who become attached to faith and begins attaching superstition to faith in the Nativity. Herod does not show how he came to the conclusion that the rampant superstition and the prophecy are directly connected and claims, "I have tried everything" (187), though certainly he did not attempt every possible solution. The only way he can see to help them is by purging the world of the prophesied child.

Herod's observation that the public wants "a God who should be as like [them] as possible" and that "There must be nothing in the least extraordinary about him" (188) indicates that Herod does not understand the spiritual value of the Nativity. He is quick to be judgmental of those around him but cannot offer a valid reason why this son of God is a bad thing. The observation that there should be nothing extraordinary about him contradicts his next statement: "And suppose...this story is true, that this child is in some inexplicable manner both God and Man, that he grows up, lives, and dies, without committing a single sin?" (189). That Jesus can be entirely both God and man, yet also not be at all extraordinary, does not work. Herod's next statement continues the folly, believing that the presence of such a person "could only mean this; that once having shown them how, God would expect every man, whatever his fortune, to lead a sinless life in the flesh and on earth" (189). There are a couple of logical fallacies here. The first and most obvious is that Christ's sinless life will mandate sinless life for all; most sects of Christianity undertake no such stringency. The second fallacy, and one general throughout the poem, is the assumption that the removal of Christ will somehow inspire the people to change their feelings about the prophecy. His fallacies continue with the

assumption that the peoples' superstitions are directly related to Christ and that there would not be some other source of superstition were it not for the prophecy. Were Herod to eliminate the son of God, those superstitious people would find somewhere else to channel their superstition. He would simply be redirecting the superstition, which Herod finds so loathsome, to some other, quite possibly worse, source of attention. Unable to realize the ramifications of his argument, Herod further exposes himself as incapable of understanding spirituality or the people he rants about.

In spite of this irrational reaction, he comes to a rather stark conclusion. Herod believes that God's choice to hold people to his own standard gives Herod the power to destroy God. That idea, however, is immediately followed by disbelief: "I refuse to be taken in. He could not play such a horrible practical joke" (*CLP* 190). Herod provides another list in an attempt to justify his innocence: "I've worked like a slave...I read all official dispatches without skipping...I've hardly ever taken bribes...I brush my teeth...I haven't had sex for a month" (190). His attempts, however, fall flat because Herod is not truly sinless. Herod attempts to replace spirituality with a list of admirable qualities, but instead he recites a list of unrelated facts as if to receive pity.

Herod, however, seems aware of his argument's shortcomings and says "I object. I'm a liberal. I want everyone to be happy" (190). If he did want everyone to be happy, Herod would have to find the space to respect other people's ideologies. Instead Herod has, at this point, worked himself into a corner. Unable to come to the conclusion Auden has, Herod gives up: "I wish I had never been born" (*CLP* 190). The answer, however, lies in the constant recurrence which Auden has created for the poem. Herod cannot grasp the significance of the anachronisms in his world. Herod cannot forge an identity based

on the state of his kingdom. He cannot discuss friends or social gatherings because these do not belong in his secular city. Even in his final pleas for clarity, he cites no spiritual reason for salvation from his situation. Instead, he focuses on the exterior, material aspects of his life: he believes he performs well in his job, isn't too corrupt, brushes his teeth and isn't promiscuous. There is certainly no spirituality in these first three acts. Sex at least has the potential for fostering emotion, but Herod does not create any such connection. Sex instead seems to be equated to a sin, an act to avoid. Thus, an act with the greatest potential for emotional significance is relegated to an unnecessary desire to be avoided or executed without consideration for greater spirituality.

Throughout Herod's speech Auden continues to use anachronisms to blur the line between the secular and spiritual. Herod is thankful for a stranger who recommends the book *Brown on Resolution*, a war novel published by C. S. Forester in 1929. The "truck-drivers" who "no longer carry guns" root the city in the 20th century. The conflicts he creates, however, serve to do something Herod cannot do by himself or in his own realm: imply that these issues are as they always were. The anxiety that Herod feels about those more spiritual than himself is reinforced as a timeless issue. However, Herod cannot see beyond the context of his city and its threatening, "barbaric" surroundings.

Jarrell attributes Auden's decision to use Herod as a rational-humanist to a need to ensure no one would agree with the rational-humanist ideology. Jarrell argues that Auden is essentially attacking his own previous ideology, observing that "Auden is attempting to get rid of a sloughed-off self by hacking it up and dropping the pieces into a bathtub full of lye" (161). Jarrell writes that this makes Auden's previous perspective indefensible, remarking that "Auden could not risk...sympathy" for Herod and pointing

out that “We are so *used* to rejecting Herod as a particularly bogey-ish Churchill that Auden can count on our going right on rejecting him when he is presented as Sir Stafford Cripps” (161).^{viii} However, Jarrell seems intent on portraying Auden as mostly interested in denigrating his old self, a perspective which ignores Auden’s use of irony and makes Herod a one dimensional character. While Herod is ultimately in the wrong, Auden still positions Herod as a sympathetic speaker. It is easy to argue that Herod is an entirely damnable character, but to do so would ignore the fact that many of Herod’s criticisms are not baseless, but that he has made the mistake of attributing them to the birth of Christ rather than each individual’s specific issue.

Herod’s inability to relate to those he sees as barbaric is problematic because Herod does not see the value in spirituality. While Herod looks upon happy spiritual subjects with great discontent, his discomfort could be addressed by embracing spirituality. Herod’s speech functions like “The Unknown Citizen” in that Herod’s belief that the secular is the only necessary source of virtue and is sufficient for a fulfilling life is incompatible with the rest of the poem. Herod’s narrow mind prevents him from reaching spirituality or happiness; Herod is anything but happy, his life is rife with frustration. Auden’s best answer rests in the way eternal and temporal, and sacred and secular, come together. The Nativity story without any sense of modernity rests entirely in abstract history, but by inserting contemporary objects and ideologies into the poem Auden complicates Herod. Thus Auden’s way of bringing together the eternal and temporal takes the Nativity out of the Bible and into a more human context, imbuing the poem with a significance to contemporary humanity beyond the Biblical origin of its source material.

At no point is this better represented than by the narrator's closing passage.

Auden's use of the Spirit and the Soul addresses the tension between the temptation to forgo the difficulties that spirituality requires, and the strength that maintaining spirituality offers. So, as the poem concludes, the world and God are almost one. The secular is inseparable from the spiritual, both offering trials and triumphs through a secular frame that encompasses both the spiritual and secular aspects of the Bible. "For the Time Being" explores the difficulties of citizens and sovereigns, presenting eternal and temporal as simultaneous. It is the poem of the spiritual *manqué*, offering spiritual significance in a Biblical context, yet offering no concrete answers to the spiritual difficulties the poem presents to its subjects or readers.

Chapter 3: Upending the Classics

Almost exactly a decade passed between the completion of “For the Time Being” in 1942 and the composition of “The Shield of Achilles” in 1952. In that time, Auden’s thoughts and subjects shifted away from Christianity, yet a concern for spiritual well-being is still present. The “voice without a face” is present in “The Shield of Achilles” in a few ways, but the poem also constructs a faceless population not dissimilar from the uniformly constructed chorus in the early sections of “For the Time Being.” Auden’s shift in concern, however, does not negate the way the poem transforms secular imagery into spiritual significance; this time Auden opts to use Homer’s *The Iliad* instead of the Bible. As with “The Unknown Citizen,” the poem does not engage with spirituality directly, but exposes that which cannot be spiritual. Nonetheless, it is a poem distinct from “The Unknown Citizen” and “For the Time Being” in that Auden uses Homer’s work as a source of inspiration. Using Homer’s description of Achilles’s shield, Auden revises the depictions on the shield to suit his own purposes.

Auden constructs the poem in two distinct spaces, the space of Homeric narrative and the modernity that Auden crafts in his rendition of the shield; each has a distinct form that helps define the context of each stanza. Auden begins with the Homeric space, though he leaves Hephaestos and Thetis unnamed until the end of the poem. Each of these mythic stanzas is an octet, where the sixth and eighth lines rhyme. The modern stanzas are all septets that follow an *a-b-a-b-b-c-c* scheme. The modern stanzas are further differentiated from the Homeric with consistently longer lines than the octets. The regularity of the form of the modern septets creates a uniformity like that of the chorus in “For the Time Being,” reinforcing the nameless and faceless aspects of the population in

the modern depictions. It is clear that the septets are descriptions of the images on the shield, which is illustrated by the first two stanzas:

She looked over his shoulder
 For vines and olive trees,
 Marble well-governed cities,
 And ships upon untamed seas,
 But there on the shining metal
 His hands had put instead
 And artificial wilderness
 And a sky like lead.

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
 No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
 Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
 Yet congregated on its blankness stood
 An unintelligible multitude,
 A million eyes, a million boots in line,
 Without expression, waiting for a sign. (*SP* 206)

The play between the mythic and modern stanzas creates a new sort of anachronism. Hephaestos is conjuring images from long after the era of the war of Troy or Achilles's shield; the way Auden moves between the modern and the Homeric is similar to the way Auden moves between the modern and the Biblical in "For the Time Being." The interplay between the scenes of the Greek figures and the scenes on the shield are not

reaffirmations of spiritual events the way “For the Time Being” is, but certainly helps the poem resist a simple understanding of its spiritual context.

The first lines of the poem, and Thetis’s desire throughout, create an idealization. She looks “For vines and olive trees, / Marble well-governed cities, / And ships upon untamed seas” (*SP* 206). In the first stanza Auden gives Thetis three expectations for her idealization. The first is fertility; society needs to be sustained by fertile land and the lush image of vine and olive indicates a fertile society. Auden makes this concern concrete in the seventh stanza, looking for “Men and women in a dance / moving their sweet limbs / Quick, quick, to music” (207). The dance embodies spiritual coupling between man and woman, leading to love, children, and the continuation of humanity. These ideals will be undermined by Hephaestus’s depictions on the shield. The second expectation, a well-governed city, implies a just society where political corruption is not a problem and prosperity can fund marbled buildings. The third expectation is an imagined ship which, notably, does not succumb to the seas, but exists as a testament to commerce and exploration. For Thetis, the ship indicates a wealthy and powerful society, for only the wealthy could fund expensive exploration. The images of Thetis’s desire are unfortunately far too unrealistic. Thetis’s primary concern is aesthetic, making her as devoid of spirituality as the rest of the poem’s subjects.

The first septet makes it abundantly clear that Thetis’s expectations are too idealistic. The “artificial wilderness” of the previous stanza constructs the environment as characterless, an aspect which also comes through in these phrases: “plain without a feature, bare and brown, / No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood” (206). The complete lack of feature implies unnatural construction; even the most barren of deserts

have dunes, cracks or dried up foliage. This environment is so devoid of character that there is not even evidence of a failed society; the environment lacks spirit as much as its subjects do.

Hephaestos unrelentingly resists the fertility that Thetis desires. Instead of fresh olives, there is “Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down” (*SP* 206). Hephaestos continues to oppose her desire later in the poem, replacing a dancing-floor with “a weed-choked field” (207), a continuation of the earlier infertile environments which indicate a lack of human care; if the area were populous with caring individuals, they would not let the field become choked with weeds. The lack of fertility is disconcerting on its own; more disturbing is the lack of sustenance. If there is an unintelligible multitude, if they are human (or at the very least organic beings), then food is a necessity that cannot be done without; that there is no food infers that the multitude is not, in fact, human.

Auden constructs a world devoid of spirituality in part by using a great number of people, but no individuals. He presents “an unintelligible multitude, / A million eyes, a million boots in line, / Without expression” (206). The synecdoche Auden uses, referring to them only by their eyes and boots, pushes the multitude even further away from humanity. Auden grants no traits to the mass of people; even their eyes contain no expression. Their lack of identity is sealed further by an unquestioning obedience. The mass of people makes no attempt to entertain itself, but just stands about “Without expression, waiting for a sign” (206). The unwavering obedience further indicates a lack of autonomy; the mass of people has no ability to forge an identity, let alone a spiritual identity.

Leading this multitude is a faceless voice. Unlike most of the poem's subjects, the voice does not simply lack of spirituality, but particularly undermines spiritual potential.

The multitudes cannot question the voice's authority:

Out of the air a voice without a face

Proved by statistics that some cause was just

In tones as dry and level as the place:

No one was cheered and nothing was discussed; (SP 206)

The faceless voice is an authority figure that no one interacts with. The voice, with such impersonal tone, seems to lack personality more than the subservient mass. If the voice without a face has no potential nor awareness for spirituality, then the multitudes certainly will not attain spirituality; their automaton-like behavior further strips the mass of the potential for spirituality. The fact that the multitudes "congregated," rather than gathered, assembled, or some other word, indicates that the "voice without a face" has replaced the spiritual congregation of faith with a superficial congregation that all the voice's subjects must buy into. Auden does offer one small possibility of interiority, that the multitude "marched away enduring a belief / Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief" (206). That these people are enduring the belief, not holding or following it, suggests that the belief is burdensome and repressive. They have no method of breaking from the ideology being forced on them. As Auden has moved into the modern realm, the individual's role has deteriorated into faceless impersonality. It is by this mode that Auden criticizes mass culture.

The fourth stanza returns to Thetis and her concern for the aesthetic. Lucy McDiarmid characterizes this concern in *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*:

Thetis is looking for...an aesthetically pleasing and emotionally harmonious vision of reconciliation between men and women, and between human beings and the universe. The scene Thetis describes is one in which by long literary and iconographic tradition aesthetic qualities signify spiritual ones. Thetis wants transcendent play, human activities elevated to a sublime spirituality. (130)

The problem with Thetis's desire for aesthetically generated spirituality is that it cannot be spiritual. Thetis's desperate search "For ritual pieties, / White flower-garlanded heifers, / Libation and sacrifice" (206) cannot produce what she desires. The depiction of libation and sacrifice cannot actually be libation and sacrifice. McDiarmid notes the way the poem argues that "the spiritual cannot be depicted in poetry or in any work of art (130). Thetis, unable to realize the shortcoming to her perspective, assumes the shield can be spiritual in and of itself. The shield, however, can only become evocative of spirituality.

By depicting a lack of spirituality, Auden is simultaneously denigrating those who would falsely construct spirituality (like Thetis) and those who are completely unaware of spirituality (like the voice without a face). Auden does not precisely define what would make one spiritual because spirituality can take many different forms; it is much simpler to reveal that which is not spiritual than to engage with that which is spiritual. The fact that none of the subjects of the poem can be clearly defined as spiritual does not mean that the poem cannot evoke spirituality. The difficulty of representing spirituality does not mean Auden's poem fails to be spiritual; it just operates by engaging with that which is not spiritual to become evocative of spirituality.

Auden intensifies this process further in the fifth and sixth stanzas. Both are septets set as art upon the shield. What they depict could scarcely be further from what Thetis wants. As Thetis continues to look over his shoulder, Hephaestos sets the scene:

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot

Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)

And sentries sweated, for the day was hot" (*SP* 207).

The arbitrary spot denotes that no significance is attached to location, and the confinement of the barbed wire is another means of controlling people. Cornelia D. J. Pearsall observes that Auden's "Barbed wire...functions ...perpetually to divide [the city] from itself, rendering arbitrary and vicious the line...between who has the right to enter, and who the inability to leave" (113). The secular power structures cannot offer a justifiable method for the divisions they create; instead these power structures are indicative of a failing government—the foil to Thetis's idealization. The officials, a part of this poorly managed government, serve no purpose outside of making their own uselessness obvious; their sentries, like peons merely capable of sweating, only exist as mindless executors of the power structure's will. The officials and sentries only perpetuate the problems caused by the "voice without a face." They neither make any decision nor take any action; the officials are so jaded by their experiences that they will joke during an execution. They are so bereft in their capacity for empathy that they embody the faceless voice.

The onlookers to this process offer one of the most potentially spiritual moments:

A crowd of ordinary decent folk

Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke

As three pale figures were led forth and bound

To three posts driven upright in the ground. (*SP* 207)

The crowd of onlookers are transfixed as they look on this revision of the crucifixion.

They are outside the barbed wire and have no power to change the fates of the bound men, yet their attention might suggest some amount of empathy. Since Auden offers no details for the crowd's interiority, it is impossible to discern whether or not they are empathetic. Their silence, however, would more likely embody empathetic concern than a group of entertainment seekers. Auden does not provide enough detail to confirm where these people rest spiritually, but because their intentions are left unclarified they are left with a potential for spirituality.

The next stanza is much grimmer. The power structures in the first half of the stanza have no regard for spirituality. Instead, those in power seem to only have regard for power:

The mass and majesty of this world, all

That carries weight and always weighs the same,

Lay in the hands of others; they were small

And could not hope for help and no help came:

What their foes liked to do was done, their shame

Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride

And died as men before their bodies died. (207)

It's tempting to find that the amount of power in the world always being the same implies that power structures never change, however Auden only implies that the amount of power never changes. The fact that the amount of power is constant does not preclude the

possibility of power changing hands. Auden makes the distinction that in this case the power is “in the hands of others,” not that it cannot change hands at some point. Nonetheless, the secular power structures depicted on the shield still have no regard for spirituality. Their victims’ spirits have indeed been broken. That these souls lose their pride and die as men before the death of the body implies that these men undergo a spiritual death, and, though Auden spares any gruesome details, he is certainly indicating that the aggressors lack spirituality.

Thetis’s final desires, aside from seeking spirituality through depictions, seek the reconciliation between warriors. The “athletes at their games” is evocative of the scene in *The Iliad* after Patroclus’s burial where the funeral games help reaffirm each man’s position in the social order and resolve any remaining tension among the men (24.598-730). Thetis wants her son to have a shield symbolic of camaraderie, fulfilling her desire for the bonds of men to be spiritual. Auden, through Hephaestus, will not allow her vision to be realized. The expectation “that art will be aesthetically pleasing, and that some form of moral and spiritual value will be somehow ‘built in’ to its beauty” (McDiarmid 31) is entirely undermined by Hephaestus’s vision of truth in the secular world. Instead, the image on the shield extends from the obedient human army to the throes of spiritual and financial poverty.

The last septet is grounded in a civilian setting rather than a military setting. The first image, “A ragged urchin, aimless and alone” (SP 207), immediately grounds the scene in squalor. His aimlessness and isolation indicate that there is no community to support him. That the urchin has nothing better to do than throw well-aimed stones at birds adds to his depravity. The fact that he does aim well further indicates that his

situation in life involves effectively casting stones; whether these stones are usually aimed at birds or something more sinister, like other children, is left unsaid, but it is evident the urchin is well practiced. The final four lines of the stanza contain an interiority not offered in the other modern stanzas of the poem:

That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
 Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
 Of any world where promises were kept
 Or one would weep because another wept. (207)

The rape and murder of the urchin's peers is not something to be understood or thought out; these are events to be accepted as part of life, indicating a society so bereft of spirituality that the urchin has no interest in discerning a reason for these transgressions. He has been so exposed to these traumas that, like the officials, his attitude toward these atrocities is one of jaded indifference. He is given no reason to trust in commitment and no circumstance with which to build an understanding of empathy. Hephaestus undermines Thetis's vision of the games with boys who will kill each other seemingly without purpose. Hephaestus ignores her desire for a fertile dance, opting instead to depict rape. How it is that Hephaestus manages to communicate these ideas through the shield is certainly debatable,^{ix} but he has no interest in discussing the ideas with Thetis. Instead, "The thin-lipped armorer, / Hephaestus, hobbled away" (*SP* 207). Just as the smith is named, he departs from the poem in silence. Whatever his reason for being silent is, it is left unexplained; whether it is for Thetis, Achilles or the wrongs he chooses to depict cannot be known.

Not only are the denizens of "The Shield of Achilles" lacking spirituality, but the environment that they inhabit lacks spirituality as well. Here Auden works in both modern and Homeric realms, criticizing those who lack spirituality, an inability to reflect, and are too concerned with superficial qualities. However, Hephaestus, and thus Auden himself, cannot become spiritual by creating depictions of spirituality in art, as is evident from the failure of Thetis's desire for art to become spiritual. In this way Auden is both testing and explaining the limitations of his work as a poet. The spirituality resides in the poem's ability to transform these secular issues into a self-reflective piece. Only through the participation of an audience who can come to the same realization which Hephaestus brings to Thetis can the spiritual significance of the poem be realized.

Conclusion

Auden recreates aspects of society that he finds problematic and in the process criticizes those who lack spirituality. The way Auden's poetry questions the spiritual value of its subjects is more explicit because Auden uses contexts that resist a single interpretation of the issues he raises. In the cases of "The Unknown Citizen," "For the Time Being," and "The Shield of Achilles," Auden uses variant contexts to approach similar social issues. In spite of these shifts from modern to mythic, secular to spiritual, and back again, Auden draws lines that can be followed across all three poems. The latent spirituality in them is manifested in Auden's discussions. The way Auden imagines the Bible as eternally undergoing reaffirmation, makes more concrete the relationship between the secular and the spiritual. Auden's later work certainly has spirituality extending through the subtext of his poetry.

In the process of explaining the virtues of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* for *The New York Times Book Review*, Auden makes an interesting point about Tolkien's work. For one, Auden distinctly disagreed with anyone who felt that *The Lord of the Rings* "cannot be anything but light 'escapist' reading" ("At the End"). Auden evidently found more than pure entertainment in Tolkien's work; his support for Tolkien's work as intellectually valuable is obvious. Auden remarks that "The difficulty in presenting a complete picture of reality lies in the gulf between the subjectively real, a man's experience of his own existence, and the objectively real, his experience of the lives of others and the world about him" ("At the End"). Auden projected his own concerns into the review. Auden is aware of the importance of subjectivity and appreciates that Tolkien does not oversimplify potentially subjective moments in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien,

he states, has managed to maintain the heroic properties of the quest “while...satisfying our sense of historical and social reality” (“At the end”). Auden’s poetry does not satisfy “our sense of historical and social reality,” but both Auden and Tolkien’s work advocate spirituality. As Auden applies thick irony, he is creating spiritual value in his work (as does Tolkien) with truths that can come through the irony.

Both Auden and Tolkien’s works are concerned with spirituality; whether or not Auden had the ideals of his poetry in mind when he wrote the review is unknowable, but he discusses virtues achieved in Tolkien’s works that Auden’s own works certainly engage with as well. Auden points to Tolkien’s ability to negotiate good and evil without compromising the principles of either.^x Auden’s poetry, and in particular Herod’s monologue, avoids oversimplifying spirituality. Auden is cognizant of poetry’s shortcomings, yet interested in probing those limitations. In the case of verse, Auden can approach spiritual problems through irony in order to criticize those who lack spirituality. All three poems involve a mindless public too disconnected from spirituality to obtain any fulfillment that is not secular. “The Unknown Citizen” leaves no room for spiritual subjects due to a collective authority that repels anyone from spirituality. The apparent irony reveals the criticism of a spiritually bereft society and aligns the poem with Auden’s concern for spiritual virtue.

Auden’s shift from complete modernity in “The Unknown Citizen” to a revision of the Bible in “For the Time Being” shifts the criticism from a proto-spirituality to an explicit spiritual concern; Auden still employs a populace that is not completely guilty of putting themselves their predicament, but they are still complicit; they are one of the targets of Auden’s criticism. The chorus’s stanzas in “For the Time Being” portray a

faceless, fallen humanity that cannot engage with the questions Auden tries to wrestle with. The poem's fallen beginning help set up the poem's climb towards an affirmation of spirituality later. This public is shallow and self-concerned, attributes which keep its members from engaging with spiritual issues in a significant way. Simeon's cogitations describe the relationship between the eternal and the temporal, which is followed by Herod's speech, which antithesizes Simeon's words, but also exposes Herod's own ideology as inadequate. Joseph and Mary also participate in the play between spiritual and secular. Mary's opportunity to right Eve's mistake by carrying God's son and achieving eternal salvation for humanity encapsulates the spiritual in the secular in a more physical way: Mary, a secular person, carries one of the most spiritual beings conceived, the son of God. Meanwhile, Joseph must negotiate a mire of secular situations where the only answer to his problems can be faith. Auden at no point stops being critical of humanity; the poem instead explores the difficulties of maintaining spirituality through the reaffirmation of the Nativity.

The manifestation of Auden's personal life in "For the Time Being" adds weight to the issues which poem raises, such as with Joseph's hardships echoing Auden's feelings towards Kallman. The dedication to Auden's mother reflects her devotion to Christianity; Auden uses the Nativity of Christ because he associates Orthodox Christian belief with his mother. Auden's relationship with Kallman takes center-stage during "The Annunciation" and "The Temptation of St. Joseph," but to make the argument that the whole of the poem is dominated by Auden's issues with Kallman would be inaccurate. Doing so would be ignoring not only to Auden's mother, but Auden's extensive spiritual explorations. "For the Time Being," in its great length, manages to address much of

Auden's life and, in this case, his search for a workable ideology. Even the sections addressing his frustration with Kallman are manifest in the poem, which attempts to resolve his appreciation of faith and spirituality with the difficulty of a failing relationship through Joseph.

Thus the shortcomings of humanity and Auden's ideology are not only directed at a nameless public, but at a personal source as well; Joseph's trials correspond to Auden's own; at no point does he try to exclude himself from his criticism. The narrator's conclusion in "For the Time Being" highlights the tension between the want for distraction from adversity and the need to make significance in one's actions; Auden knows he is subject to all these issues.

Auden raises these issues again in "The Shield of Achilles." The nameless public returns as an automated army; responsibility is unassignable to this mass of people as well. The lack of responsibility from the subjects is indicative of a lack of investment; the subjects are not invested in faith. The modern realm has no room for spirituality and no concrete indication from the subjects of any reflexivity; the Homeric realm is saturated with Thetis's conceptions of spirituality, but lacks spirituality in that Thetis's desired depictions, while indicative of a spiritual potential, cannot ascend to actual spirituality. Her zeal has become a vanity, failing to reach spirituality.

Though "The Unknown Citizen" is dominated by secular imagery, its proto-spiritual potential allows the poem to engage with spiritual issues; the few potentially spiritual moments might be undermined by the speaker, but Auden's irony makes the corporate voice ridiculous and untenable. "For the Time Being" uses the Nativity story as a foundation, yet is framed by and pervaded with secular issues; the relationship between

the secular framework and spiritual subtext reaffirms that the spiritual and the secular are codependent. "The Shield of Achilles," by alternating stanza for stanza between Homeric and modern realms, continues to encapsulate the spiritual in the secular as "For the Time Being" does; by making obvious the lack of spirituality in the poem's subjects, Auden criticizes those unable to appreciate spirituality.

Herod's speech is the most interesting of the ironized speakers. While the poem constructs the man who ordered "The Massacre of the Innocents" in a much more sympathetic light than would be expected of a tyrant, Auden portrays the difficulties of the rational-liberal-humanist perspective which he once held himself. Throughout all three poems Auden also draws a lot of attention towards those who are unreflective; Herod in particular is never aware of any of the fallacies committed in his arguments. The narrator in "For the Time Being" even takes a few lines to sympathize with a desire to be unreflective. The difficult matter is that Auden makes no direct accusations in his poems. Instead, ironic and sarcastic voices manage to convey the same criticisms without directly leveling them at a source. This makes Auden's intent less evident, yet allows his poetry to coalesce more significantly with his complicated perspective on faith and spirituality.

Mendelson elaborates on this complexity:

Auden's sense of his divided motives was inseparable from his idiosyncratic Christianity. He had no literal belief in miracles or deities and thought that all religious statements about God must be false in a literal sense but might be true in metaphoric ones. He felt himself commanded to an absolute obligation—which he knew he could never fulfill—to love his neighbor as himself...He...valued ancient

liturgy...because its timeless language ritual was a 'link between the dead and the unborn' ("Secret Auden")

Auden may have had a difficult time crafting his personal spiritual perspective, but the poems discussed here evidence reflection on spirituality increasingly becoming a part of his concerns. The poems don't try to force a reader into Auden's perspective, but instead present thought-provoking situations which ask for the reader's consideration. By translating the Bible into a modern context, Auden begins to negotiate the relevance of the spiritual aspects of the Bible, transforming his poetry into more than political criticism. The result is not simple; the poems raise more questions than they answer and Auden never found the answers himself. What he left behind was spirituality in a subtle, yet powerful form.

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ⁱ *SP* refers to Auden's *Selected Poems* and *CP* refers to his *Collected Poems*.

ⁱⁱ While Mendelson argues that the corporate voice of "The Unknown Citizen" identifies freedom and happiness with conformity, the poem actually constructs the corporate voice as unconcerned with freedom or happiness. Auden suggests that the corporate voice confuses a concern for freedom and happiness with a concern for whether anything is "wrong."

ⁱⁱⁱ For sake of clarity, "For the Time Being" refers to the poem itself. *For the Time Being* refers to the book in which the poem was first published in 1944.

^{iv} I will refer to the italicized headings within the poem as sections with quotation marks around them (e.g. "Advent") in order to maintain the stylistic precedent set by Mendelson. The roman numerals under each section will be referred to as either parts or passages.

^v While Auden could have been referring to any pilgrimage, and which pilgrimage he had in mind does little to change the meaning of the passage, as noted by Derek Bright in *The Pilgrims' Way: Fact and Fiction of an Ancient Trackway*, The Pilgrim Way often refers to the traditional path used for the pilgrimage to Canterbury (11).

^{vi} There is the possibility of a poke at Las Vegas on Auden's part, but evidence is inconclusive. Auden had travelled through Nevada with Kallman in August 1939 (Carpenter 271), but there is no specific note of Las Vegas. Further, Las Vegas's first years of significant growth were 1940-45 (Moehring and Green 108-9). Whether or not Las Vegas's reputation as Sin City had solidified and reached Auden by the time he finished writing "For the Time Being" in 1942 would be speculation.

^{vii} "Shall we continue / in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid" (*Collected* 131).

^{viii} Sir Stafford Cripps was an influential and well-liked British political figure through the first half of the twentieth century. For more information on Cripps, see Andrew Mitchell's essay "Cripps, (Richard) Stafford," in which Mitchell notes Cripps's "integrity, competence, and Christian principles" (176).

^{ix} McDiarmid undertakes a thorough discussion of the "undepictable" nature of the abstract ideas which Hephaestos renders on the shield in her text, *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, arguing that Auden is elaborating on the limitations of the arts (128-33).

^x Auden illustrates this by drawing a comparison between Tolkien and Milton; essentially, he argues that Milton's God is a contradiction (how can God be all loving if he also claims absolute power and wages war with Satan in order to banish him to hell?) whereas the forces of good in *The Lord of the Rings* cannot wield power to subjugate evil or they will themselves become corrupted ("At the End").